DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 330 373 IR 053 582

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TITLE	The Role of Libraries in Literacy Education. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources, Syracuse, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-IR-90-9
PUB DATE	Dec 90
CONTRACT	RI88062008
NOTE	4p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources, 030 Huntington hall, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244-2340 (free while supply lasts).
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Basic Education; Educational Needs; Federal Legislation; *Illiteracy; *Library Role; *Library Services; *Literacy Education; National Organizations; National Programs; Research Needs; State Libraries
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Noting that one of the three major themes for the 1991 White House Conference on Library and Information Services is the role of the library in literacy education, this digest begins by describing how national awareness of the problem has led to legislation, both at the state and federal level, to fund new literacy programs and expand existing ones. Two examples of federal legislation are briefly described: the National Literacy Act (U.S. Senate) and Literacy for All Americans (U.S. House of Representatives). A compromise bill was developed by a joint committee in 1990, but was not voted into law. Also in 1990, the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) was reauthorized, with suggestions for increased appropriations. Two new literacy organizations that focus on the needs of special groups are also noted: the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, and the National Center for Family Literacy. The results of a national forum on literacy for state libraries held in May 1990 are briefly summarized, and four priorities recommended by this forum for consideration at the White House Conference are given. It is also noted that research is needed to provide current data on the extent of illiteracy and comparable data on the effectiveness of different literacy programs, as well as to reach agreement on the fundamental meaning of the term literacy. The digest concludes with an overview of the types of support for literacy education efforts provided by libraries, including the provision of teaching resources, literacy classes, and targeting groups at risk for literacy-related problems. (5 references/4 additional readings) (MAB)

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ED330373

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by Linda Schamber

EDO-IR-90-09

ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources
Syracuse University

1990

IR 053 582

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ERIC DIGEST

December 1990

EDO-IR-90-9

The Role of Libraries in Literacy Education

By Linda Schamber

Illiteracy among Americans, with its social and economic implications, has become a growing concern in recent years. National awareness of problems associated with limited literacy skills has led to legislation, beginning at the federal level, to fund new literacy programs and expand existing programs. Libraries and information centers are viewed as an important component of this massive educational effort. Accordingly, library and information services for literacy is one of three major themes of the 1991 ***White House Conference on Library and Information Services*** to be held in Washington, D.C., July 9-13, 1991.

National Awareness and Support

Generally, literacy is considered to be the ability to read, write, speak, and compute at a certain level. Functional literacy involves skills needed to cope at an adult level in everyday situations, such as reading a newspaper or completing a job application form. People who lack these abilities often are members of populations suffering from poverty, crime, and unemployment. According to 1983 statistics from the U.S. Department of Education, there were 27 million functionally illiterate adults in the country, and 47 million more were having difficulty in some of the domains tested (Davidson, 1988). The current extent of the problem is thought to be much greater than these figures indicate. The need for programs to increase literacy has been acknowledged through support from the federal government, from many organizations in the education and library and information fields, and from business and industry.

In 1990 Congress produced two comprehensive pieces of legislation affecting literacy programs: the National Literacy Act passed by the Senate, and Literacy for All Americans, part of an omnibus education bill passed by the House of Representatives. A compromise bill was developed by a joint committee, but was not voted into law in 1990. Separate bills are expected to be introduced again in the House and in the Senate in 1991. Also in 1990, the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA), which has supported a variety of programs, including literacy programs, for more than 20 years, was reauthorized with new language and suggestions for increased appropriations for 1991. In fiscal year 1989, 214 library literacy programs in 47 states were funded through LSCA Title VI, and in 1990, 237 received support (Humes & Cameron, 1990).

Library literacy programs have also been funded by state and local resources or by individual donations, or coordinated through literacy organizations. In addition, new literacy organizations hold promise for assisting libraries in implementing literacy programs. Two that focus on the needs of special groups are the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy and the National Center for Family Literacy. Both provide funding and training for program development, and information to program providers and government policymakers (Talan, 1990).

Need for Commitment

Quezada (1990) reports on a national forum on literacy for state libraries, held in May 1990, intended to generate recommendations for shaping a national library literacy policy. While some participants initially viewed libraries as playing only a supporting role to education, a stronger position eventually emerged: that of libraries as lifelong learning centers, with education an essential part of their mission. In this role they must actively commit time and resources to coordinating literacy activities at all levels. "Public, special, academic, and institutional libraries have a responsibility," Quezada says, "to promote literacy among *all* members of their community, users and nonusers alike" (p. 23). She also notes that the "American Library Association's official position on the role of libraries in the area of literacy *encourages* library involvement and places *no limitation* on how libraries should be involved in literacy education" (p. 24).

The results of the forum were these priorities for recommendation at the 1991 White House Conference on Library and Information Services:

- incorporate into existing legislation the concept of the library as an educational agency
- develop a strategy for more stable funding for literacy
- continue to improve evaluation, research, and dissemination of library-based literacy efforts by libraries and other literacy providers
- redirect administrative responsibility for LSCA titles related to literacy directly to the state library agency (p. 24).

In addition to the legislative priorities, at least three challenges are implicit in the call for research and evaluation. One problem is the lack of current data on the extent of illiteracy. Another is the lack of comparable data on the effectiveness of different literacy programs. Finally, there is no agreement on the fundamental mean-

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ing of *literacy*. Beyond the definition of literacy as the basic *3 R's* skills for adults, some writers include concepts of information or computer skills; others include concepts of family, community, or cultural literacy.

Library Services for Literacy

Over the years, many libraries have supported literacy education efforts by providing teaching resources, space for tutoring, and information and referral services. Some program sponsors have compiled bibliographies of adult new reader materials—materials that are not too "childish" to appeal to mature learners and that respond to their personal interests, such as getting a driver's license. Others have adopted or developed software programs that provide interactive drills and testing for computer-assisted learning.

A more active approach has been taken by libraries offering literacy classes or one-to-one tutoring programs. Many libraries have outreach programs designed to meet the needs of specific groups of people with limited literacy skills. For example, people for whom English is a second language, who present a diversity of first languages and literacy levels, have been reached through tutoring programs with materials that match their cultures and interests. Appropriate materials have also been distributed to the institutionalized, including those in prisons, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and group homes for the elderly and disabled. Intensive prison programs, coordinated under a literacy librarian, have offered specialized software and English-as-a-second-language training (Mathews, Chute, & Cameron, 1986).

In addition, some libraries offer programs for groups at risk for literacy-related problems. Adolescents have been targeted because illiteracy has been associated with other problems including crime, pregnancy, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, and school failure. After-school and summer literacy programs have sought to encourage young people to become employable, contributing members of the community and generally to raise their self-esteem. Strategies have included homework help sessions, peer tutoring, and peer-group reading sessions (Davidson, 1988).

Families have been targeted because illiteracy seems to be passed from one generation to the next: children whose parents are functionally illiterate are twice as likely as their peers to be functionally illiterate. In family literacy programs, emphasis is on the parent's role as the child's first teacher. Parents, who may have been inspired to seek literacy training by concern for their children, are taught interactive language activities for use with infants and young children. Some libraries invite entire families to share in reading activities and booktalks, with each member borrowing a book to take home (Talan, 1990).

Many resources exist for libraries interested in literacy education. Project reports, guidance manuals, and bibliographies have emerged from successful library-based literacy programs. Much information is also available through statewide literacy coalitions and various literacy organizations.

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This digest was prepared for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources by Linda Schamber, School of Information Studies, Syracuse University, December 1990.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under Contract No. RI88062008. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.